

French virtuoso and BPO bring nonstop excitement to massive ‘Rach 3’

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The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra is about to wake up those sleepy snowbirds down in Florida. This weekend, the orchestra and Music Director JoAnn Falletta, joined by pianist **Philippe Bianconi**, are giving Buffalo a preview of the concert they are taking on the road.

What a concert it is. Bianconi is playing Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 3. In the right hands, the “Rach 3” brings the house down. And on Saturday, Bianconi showed he was the man for the job.

The first half of the concert is Dvorak’s extroverted, dramatic Symphony No. 6. Both pieces give the orchestra plenty to do. It amounts to nonstop excitement.

In the Rachmaninoff, the spotlight is on the piano, sure, but the flute gets its moments in the limelight, and so does the trumpet – all perfectly scripted, everything in its place.

Saturday’s performance was eminently satisfying. Bianconi is an old-school kind of performer. A **winner of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, he radiates the pageantry and tradition of the concert pianist. He strides out confidently in time-honored concert finery, tossing his tails over the bench. I love that.**

His clothes reflect the attitude he brings to the music. Bianconi has this challenging concerto down. He knows how to handle the piano and get volume out of it. You can pretty much catch every note. The massive cadenza of the first movement, not always included, rang out with force and fire.

At times the first movement sounded a little too fast. There is a temptation to rush this thing, **because it’s so exciting. But it always stayed under control. Left to himself, Bianconi feels free to bend the tempo, and it was glorious to hear him linger on phrases, savoring their beauty. He also has the gift of projecting a distinct, lovely melody line. The slow movement, especially, brought out these qualities.**

The all-important last movement delivered the goods. It had a percussive, metallic excitement. There was one brief interlude, only one, when the piano was drowned out by the orchestra. And I think it is supposed to be that way. There is so much going on, so many instruments involved in so many different things, and the volume builds to this crashing level, and you see the pianist’s hands pounding the piano and yet you hear nothing. That is the kind of thrill you don’t get listening in your living room.

By this time, Bianconi and the orchestra both were tight. Resolutions resonated and there were neat, breathless silences and staccatos. Falletta and Bianconi both built the music up gradually, holding their thunder, until the last moments when, in grand Rachmaninoff tradition, everything tips over the edge. The final crescendo was everything it should be. The hall went wild. I was so caught up in the moment I forgot that because of my deadline I had to leave. Luckily because of that I got to hear the encore, a heart-melting Variation No. 5 from Schumann's Symphonic Etudes.

The Dvorak, in its own way, had similar drama to the Rachmaninoff. In this expansive, easy-to-love symphony, no section of the orchestra is ever idle. Everyone is involved, and there is plenty to watch.

It is like Brahms in its open, clear harmonies, which sounded luminous in the pristine hall. The slow movement, with its caressing themes, was luxuriously lovely. The part that will have you on the edge of your seat is in the finale, when the theme goes "around the world" – that is, it chases from one section of the orchestra to another. You can practically see it fly. First it whips through the strings section, then on to the violas, then into the basses, then somewhere else. God love the basses, they played quickly and crisply. It is great fun to watch Falletta directing this action. She actually traces a circle in the air.

Brace yourself, Florida! We get one more performance before the show goes on the road. The concert repeats at 2:30 p.m. today.

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